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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000690

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04-22-14

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SUBJECT: Amid raucous scenes, initial vote on Speaker of Parliament ends in tie; Another vote expected soon

Refs: (A) OpsCenter-Colombo telecon 04-22-04

- (B) Colombo 685, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Sri Lanka's Parliament convened on April 22. The opening session was chaotic, with both sides of the chamber hurling invective at each other. Initial voting for the Speaker of Parliament ended in a 108-108 tie between the government and Opposition candidates. Another vote is expected late April 22 or April 23. The government, which still has yet to prove that it has a majority in Parliament, will lose significant face if it loses the Speaker vote. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) PARLIAMENT CONVENES: Sri Lanka's 13th Parliament -- with its membership reflecting the results of the April 2 election -- convened on April 22. At 10:00 a.m. local time, Secretary General of Parliament Priyaneer Wijesekera formally opened the Parliament session by reading a brief message of greetings from President Kumaratunga. (The Secretary General job is a non-party, civil service position. Wijesekera has had the job since 2002.) During the session, Wijesekera had to interrupt various outbursts of hooting and hollering between the government and the Opposition sides of the aisle, and remind the parliamentarians to focus on the business at hand. Despite her best efforts, there clearly was a lot of tension in the chamber and it continued to spill out throughout the day.

3. (SBU) INITIAL VOTE ON SPEAKER ENDS IN TIE: The first order of business following the opening ceremony was a vote to elect the Speaker of Parliament. The two candidates for the Speaker position were D.E.W. Gunasekera of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and former minister W.J.M. Lokubandara of the United National Party (UNP). (Note: The "UPFA" is the technical term for the grouping of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party "SLFP," the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna "JVP," and several small leftist parties. Gunasekera is an MP for Sri Lanka's small Communist Party.) The first vote, done by secret ballot, ended in a tie between the government and Opposition candidates, who each garnered 108 votes. There were nine abstentions. Most of the abstentions apparently came from the ranks of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a new political party with nine MPs, all of whom are Buddhist monks. Two JHU MPs reportedly voted for the UPFA. One member of the pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Tamil National Alliance (TNA) from Batticaloa District in the east did not vote and there was one "spoiled vote."

4. (C) ANOTHER VOTE EXPECTED SOON: Another vote on the Speaker position is expected late April 22 or April 23. From what Mission understands, the scene in Parliament continues to be quite chaotic as both sides scramble into the evening hours for the votes needed to take their candidate over the top. At this time, the seven JHU monks who have reportedly been abstaining in the voting appear to be in the driver's seat. If these monks come off the fence, their decision could decide which candidate wins the vote. Based on the fact that two JHU monks have already apparently voted with the UPFA, it seems possible that other JHU MPs may also drift that way in the next round of voting. (In general, the JHU's views on major issues such as the peace process are closer to the UPFA's than to the UNP's. The monks, however, have made it a big point that they want to preserve their neutrality on political matters to the full extent possible.) If the tie continues in the next round, Parliament will continue voting until some sort of decision is reached. After the Speaker's position is decided on, there will also be votes on the deputy speaker, the head of committees position, and also on the deputy head of committees.

5. (C) COMMENT: At this point, the UPFA coalition

remains a minority government -- it has yet to prove that it commands majority support in the 225-member Parliament. Amid serious political disagreements between the SLFP and the JVP over ministerial allocations, the UPFA will also lose significant face if it loses the Speaker vote. If it can somehow win the Speaker race, however, the government could get it itself on track, but it is quickly becoming apparent that its grip over Parliament is weak. END COMMENT.

16. (U) Minimize considered.

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